

Understanding and Preventing Home Invasion in South Africa

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1. Introduction

This document contains the key findings of research conducted for his PhD by Professor Rudolph Zinn, senior lecturer in Forensic and Crime investigation at the University of South Africa. Most of the information comes from a book launched at the IS Pretoria office on 19 May 2010 titled “Home Invasion: Robbers disclose what you should know.” The book is currently available at various bookstores across South Africa.

The primary objective of the research was to establish the type of crime intelligence that could be obtained by the police from convicted and incarcerated perpetrators of residential robbery. Similar research has guided intelligence-led policing utilised in a variety of countries including the UK, the USA, Netherlands and Germany. The premise of the research is that focused, intelligence guided policing results in a more efficient and effective utilisation of police resources in combating and reducing crime than ordinary visible policing tactics. Intelligence led policing therefore focuses on combating and reducing crime through understanding and identifying the perpetrators of as opposed to, for example, relying primarily on high police visibility operations in crime hot spots.

Currently, this approach is not being utilised sufficiently in South Africa, which limited the extent to which the South African Police Service has been able to effectively tackle violent organised crime. The research was undertaken with the intention of demonstrating its utility to the South African Police Services Crime Intelligence and Investigative components. Fortunately, according to Professor Zinn, the SAPS Crime Intelligence Unit have responded favourably to the research findings and are implementing a number of its recommendations.

2. Methodology

The research was based on in-depth interviews with 30 perpetrators who were convicted and incarcerated for the crime of “aggravated robbery.” Please note that there is no legal crime in South Africa defined as “residential robbery”. To identify the research subjects, the researcher was given a list of names of prisoners convicted for aggravated robbery and went from cell to cell looking for those that had been convicted specifically for residential robbery. The research subjects volunteered to be interviewed and they were subject to 116 structured and open-ended questions. The focus of the research was on the inmates of the six largest prisons in Gauteng as they house 86% of all prisoners who have been convicted for aggravated robbery in the province.

It must state that the statistics to emerge from the research are not necessarily generalisable to all perpetrators or all instances of residential robbery. The statistics only refer to the sample of 30 research subjects stated during the interviews with them. It is important not to interpret the findings in a general way such as “X% of all house robbers

do the following ...” or “In Y% of all house robberies ...” This was a qualitative study and its utility was to allow for a better understanding of the profile, motivation and modus operandi of perpetrators of residential robberies. While the research is therefore not necessarily generalisable, it does provide useful insights into how they plan and carry out attacks and what can be done to enhance protective or preventative measures so as to avoid becoming a victim.

3. The Profile of Residential Robbery Perpetrators

The 30 research subjects interviewed conformed to the following broad profile:

- All were males except for two females who were convicted as being accessories to the crime rather than the primary instigators.
- They were representative of South Africa’s racial demographic profile.
- 83% were South African citizens with the remaining 17% holding the citizenship of other African countries.
- The subjects were between the ages of 19 and 26 years old.
- On average they would form a group of four people when attacking a household.
- Only 20% had completed high school to grade 12 and none had further tertiary education.
- 76% were unemployed but a number of these had left employment to make money solely from robbery.
- 80% had not received any type of military or security related training. The remaining 20% that had received such training had either been employed as security guards or were foreign nationals who had worked in the police or military of their home countries.
- All were experienced criminals and had committed a number of other crimes before deciding to target households for robbery.
- On average, each perpetrator admitted to having committed 103 crimes (including crimes other than robberies) over a seven-year period before being arrested for the first time.
- 70% came from what was described as dysfunctional or “broken” homes.
- Given the nature of the crime, a distinctive characteristic of house robbers is the willingness to use lethal violence against victims. Most people who fit the same general profile (e.g. young, unemployed, from dysfunctional families) do not commit violent crime.

4. Motivation for Involvement in Residential Robberies

- 97% of the perpetrators in the study stated that the primary motivating factor for becoming involved in this type of crime was “economic gain”.
- 22% of the perpetrators had also committed “farm attacks” (which are considered no differently as robberies of other types of residences by the perpetrators).
- 65% of what was stolen was spent on “cars, clothes, drugs, and alcohol”.
- 35% of what was stolen was spent on “survival” (i.e. food and rent).

- The victims were targeted because of their wealth. Other demographical factors such as race played no part in decisions of the perpetrators to target specific households.
- A contributory factor was the existence of role models in their communities who were criminals and were wealthy because of criminal activities. These individuals are well known and generally respected in their communities.
- 80% of the perpetrators in the study stated that their families, friends and acquaintances in their communities knew that they were involved in crime to make a living. This indicates a high tolerance for criminality in the communities from where they came.
- Residential robbery was chosen as a particular crime to become involved in because it resulted in more money more quickly than other types of crime and chances of being caught were seen as very low.
- All the perpetrators started with non-violent property crimes (i.e. theft) before progressing to violent crimes (i.e. robberies).

5. Choosing a Target

- 63% of the perpetrators in the study would prefer to travel between 10 and 30 minutes by vehicle from where they lived to commit a residential robbery. However, most would travel for much longer time periods if the target were deemed lucrative enough.
- 77% of the perpetrators stated that they chose targets for which they had some 'inside information.' For example, they would be able to get information about a particular house from domestic workers, gardeners or other service providers including security guards (or from the relatives or acquaintances of these people).
- Some perpetrators know people who make a living through burglary and will get information on specific houses from them.
- Generally, perpetrators would prefer to choose targets in neighbourhoods that had many entrance and exit points with easy access to main roads and where street security was low or non-existent.
- However, only 25% of the perpetrators in the research stated that they deliberately chose a house because it had low security. Rather, targets were chosen because they had reasonable information or suspicion that there would be much of value to steal once they had gained access to the property.
- The perpetrators in this study stated that they would tend to focus on what they termed as the "middle class." However, this term was used quite broadly to talk about anyone who had relative wealth. Sometimes people with expensive jewellery, clothes or other visible signs of affluence would be followed home with the assumption that they would have expensive possessions in their residences.

6. Planning and Executing a Residential Robbery

- All perpetrators stated that they would spend some time prior to the attack doing surveillance on the targeted residence. In some cases this could be as little as 30 minutes prior to the attack and in other cases up to two weeks. The purpose of the

surveillance is to orientate the perpetrators to the layout and types of neighbourhood and household security measures, and the habits and patterns of the residents.

- A majority of the perpetrators (57%) stated that they preferred to carry out residential robberies between 19h00 and 24h00 in the evening. This was when most people are at home, have disabled alarm systems and opened doors and windows. Also it is a time when there is noise from televisions and radios, which will provide the perpetrators with some level of cover to allow them to take the victims by surprise.
- 14% of the perpetrators also attacked houses between 03h00 and 07h00 in the morning as it was quiet, the neighbours would be asleep or not paying particular attention and visitors to the house would not disturb them.
- 7% stated that they also attacked houses between 10h00 and 12h00 in the mid-to late mornings. This was when domestic workers would be in the house, doors would be open, alarms would also be turned off and there would be the relative cover of noise.
- The most common way to access a property was to 'break-in' by forcing locks on gates or doors, breaking windows or disabling electric fences and climbing over the walls.
- Some of the perpetrators used exceptions to this by attacking houses where there were social functions as they could simply walk through gates or doors that were left open. In some cases the perpetrators would wait for the residents to leave or arrive home and attack them in the driveway before forcing them inside the house.
- Before breaking into the house, the perpetrators stated that they would try and identify the numbers and locations of everyone who was in the house. They would typically do this during the pre-attack surveillance and once they were in the property, by peering through windows preferably under the cover of darkness.
- The purpose of doing this is to surprise all the residents at once so that they do not have time to take defensive action such as raising the alarm or acquiring a weapon.
- Perpetrators in this study would spend anywhere between 30 minutes and four hours inside a house once they had successfully subdued the residents.

7. The Use of Violence in Robberies

- All perpetrators stated that they used violence or the threat of violence when entering a residence to overcome resistance from the victims.
- To assist in this, 97% of the perpetrators in this study used firearms when they committed robberies.
- They preferred pistols, as these were easy to conceal before and after the robbery. In addition the perpetrators liked pistols because of the sound the weapon made when 'cocking' it as this could also be used to intimidate victims.
- During the residential robbery, 67% of the perpetrators admitted committing assault, 30% admitted to committing murder, 13% admitted to committing rape and 13% admitted to torturing victims during a residential robbery. *(Please note, this does not mean that people are murdered in 30% of residential robberies. Only that 30% of this sample admitted to having committed at least one murder in their lifetime. Statistics from an SAPS docket analysis in relation to violence associated with residential robberies is provided at the end of this document).*

- According to these perpetrators, the use of torture was to force the victims to reveal the whereabouts of valuables in the house such as cash, firearms or jewellery.
- The torture most frequently mentioned consists of pouring boiling water or melted plastic on the victims or burning them with household instruments (e.g. an iron).
- The perpetrators in the study stated that they would most likely target women or children for torture during a robbery to force the male or adult to provide the information they required.

8. Preventing or Minimising the Risk of Residential Robberies

The research found that community crime prevention initiatives could make a difference in reducing the risk of a certain area becoming targeted by perpetrators of house robberies. For example regular neighbourhood watch schemes, random community patrol initiatives, or guards stationed at street corners who are linked by radio communication will make a certain community less attractive to criminals. For example, the police precinct of Garsfontein recorded a decrease of 36.5% in residential robberies during the 2007/08 financial year following community based crime prevention initiatives. This was at a time when residential robberies were increasing substantially across the country.

The research also sought to identify measures that could be taken by people to minimise the risk of their particular residence becoming a target. The perpetrators were asked about the things that would make them hesitate to target a house or that would make it difficult for them to access a house. **They generally answered that if the reward was big enough nothing could keep them from attacking a house.** Nevertheless, there were factors that would make their lives difficult and could hamper their attack on a house. Out of 119 different answers that were given, the most frequently mentioned preventative measures in order of effectiveness were stated as follows:

- The presence of a number of small dogs inside the house that will bark when they become aware of suspicious activity outside. Teach any dogs not to take food from strangers, as perpetrators will not hesitate to poison a dog to neutralise it as a threat.
- Razor wire or electric security fences around the entire perimeter of the house. **Beware of an electric fence alarm repeatedly going off as this could be caused by perpetrators deliberately causing a short-circuit to the fence in order to get the residents to turn the fence off.**
- Pre-warning alarm systems such as security alarm sensors in the garden, along the outside walls, on the roof and in the ceiling. Alarm systems in garages or storerooms will make perpetrators lives difficult, as they generally do not carry housebreaking tools with them. They usually break into a garage or tool shed first to get what they need to force the locks or break the windows of a house.
- An armed response service.
- There is an 'open view' into the house or garden from the street or a neighbouring property. This means that the perpetrator could be seen by a neighbour or a person in the street.

- Security lights that make it difficult to move around the outside of the house at night without being seen, especially sensor lights in front of bedrooms.
- **CCTV systems and an intercom system for speaking to people who are outside of the property.**
- **Layers of security as opposed to a single security system.**
- **Strong doors and security gates with good quality locks.**
- Door alarms that are activated when residents are at home.
- Curtains are drawn at night which prevent perpetrators from identifying the movement and location of the residents in the house.
- **The existence of a “secure room” within the house where residents are able to escape to once they are aware of an attack.**
- Panic buttons should be placed where residents are most likely to need them. Apart from doorways, these devices should be kept in places where residents will be able to access them in places where they are likely to be held during the robbery. For instance in the lounge under chairs or tables, under beds in bedrooms, in bathrooms as people are often locked in bathrooms and bedrooms during a robbery.
- **Always check for signs of a forced entry when entering or leaving your home.**
- **Keep a copy of the ID Book of any employees who have access to or work at the house including names and contact details of their relatives.**

In analysing the responses, the researcher found that out of all the measures that would hinder a house robber, 68% of them refer to securing the outer-perimeter of house and garden while 32% refer to internal security systems. This is because once the perpetrators have managed to get close to the house, the advantage they have in terms of the element of surprise leaves the residents with fewer defensive options. However, if the residents are alerted to a person jumping over their wall, they will have time to lock doors and raise the alarm.

9. Minimising Personal Risk during a Robbery

If the perpetrators manage to evade external security measures and are able to get access to the house, the behaviour of the residents then becomes very important if they are to survive the incident without harm. Most serious injuries and fatalities in residential robberies occur during the initial phase and are often linked to the attempts of the victims to resist the attackers. All perpetrators in the study stated that they would rather shoot a person than expose themselves to risk of injury during a house robbery.

As the first phase of the attack is the most dangerous from the point of view of the perpetrator, it is during this time that they are most adrenalised and are prone to acting on the spur of the moment. According to the perpetrators in the study, the victims of a robbery should do the following if they are confronted in their home to minimise the chances of being shot or seriously assaulted:

- They should not move when seeing a stranger holding a gun.
- Any sudden movement or noise could lead to the perpetrator thinking that the resident is trying to take defensive action and it could result in a violent response including being shot at.

- Remain calm and do not make a noise.
- Keep your hands visible, but do not raise them above your head as this may be mistaken by the perpetrator as an attempt to signal help.
- Demonstrate willingness to cooperate by either pleading for your life, or asking not to be hurt and saying that they can take what they want.

10. Key lessons for the Police

It is very difficult for the police to prevent residential robberies through regular policing tactics as the perpetrators plan their attacks very carefully. More organised perpetrators will assess the policing of a particular area as part of their surveillance to establish the risk that they face if they commit a robbery there. They may also have a sense of the reaction time of the police in a particular locality through their own or others' previous experience of committing a serious crime that was reported to the police.

Nevertheless, 68% of the perpetrators in the study stated that frequent and random police patrols would be a deterrent to them from targeting houses in a particular area. This supports the tactic of increasing visible policing patrols and roadblocks during hot-spot areas and times (Fridays through Sundays from 18h00 to 24h00) to reduce the incidents of residential robberies in particular geographical areas. However, this will not necessarily drive down the overall rate of residential robberies, as the perpetrators will adjust their tactics to evade the police. In this way, visible policing is more likely to displace the crime of residential robbery to different areas and times as opposed to preventing it.

The best way for the police to prevent residential robberies is to identify, arrest and support the prosecution of the perpetrators to increase their risks of going to prison. If increasing numbers of perpetrators are locked up, fewer perpetrators will be around to commit these crimes and fewer people will be willing to take on the risks of becoming involved in this type of crime as a way of making a living. This will result in the numbers of robberies decreasing which will in turn build community trust in the police, which again will increase the ability of the police to tackle other crimes.

For the police to ensure that perpetrators are sent to prison, the necessary resources will have to be made available for the police to:

- Identify and arrest perpetrators; and
- Support the successful prosecution of perpetrators.

This requires prioritising and strengthening the quality and capacity of police crime intelligence and the detectives tasked with investigating residential robberies.

The study focused particularly on the type of crime intelligence that the incarcerated could provide the police to assist them in tackling residential robberies. It found that there is a good “window period” for obtaining significant intelligence from convicted robbers.

At this time they are willing to provide detailed intelligence on other perpetrators and syndicates for relatively small improvements in their personal situation. According to the

research, this includes for instance, that their cooperation with the police is considered favourably when they come up for parole. They would also be willing to provide information for improvements in privileges such as more credit at the prison canteen, better prison duties etc. This would not be too onerous to achieve when compared to the valuable information that could be provided to the police about the networks who are involved in committing and supporting aggravated robbery.

Conclusion

The research conducted by Dr Zinn provides the most detailed insight into the perpetrators of residential robberies that is available to date. As it was mentioned earlier in this document, the statistics may not be generalisable to the entire population of perpetrators and so it shouldn't be interpreted as such. For example, although 30 % of the perpetrators in this study admitted to committing murder during a residential robbery, an analysis of 1000 dockets undertaken by the SAPS found the following:

- Murder occurred in two percent of the incidents.
- Rape was reported in four percent of the incidents.
- Attempted murders were reported in nine percent of incidents.
- Some form of injury was reported in 13% of incidents.

This means that in a vast majority of residential robberies, the victims are left physically unharmed. Nevertheless, each incident of residential robbery is extremely traumatic for the victim because of the heightened potential for being murdered, raped or seriously injured. This crime category (along with robbery in general) is therefore responsible for driving the high levels of fear and dissatisfaction with the police according to victimisation surveys.

For additional information and statistics on residential robberies and government initiatives to combat it, see the following articles on the ISS website:

- "Reclaiming our homes? Tackling residential robbery in Gauteng." *SA Crime Quarterly No 23. March 2008*
- "Cops and robbers. A new approach." *SA Crime Quarterly No. 29. September 2009*

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